

# Longshore Union shuts ports on May Day to protest war

On May Day 2008, thousands of longshore workers shut down 29 West Coast ports to protest the war in Iraq. The action may have been the first ever walk-out by a U.S. union to oppose a war. The current Iraq war has lasted five years, and over 4,000 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been killed and countless wounded and maimed.

The estimated 6,000 longshore workers who were scheduled for work on May 1 lost a day's wages and risked employer retaliation for their action. The employer group, Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), said the action violated its labor agreement with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). PMA warned that workers could face discipline, but ILWU members were undeterred.

"Longshore workers are standing-down on the job and standing up for America," said ILWU President Bob McEllrath in a May 1 statement to the press. "We're supporting the troops and telling politicians in Washington that it's time to end the war in Iraq."

About 10,000 containers are loaded and unloaded coastwise during an eight-hour day, PMA said.

The decision to shut down the ports was first made Feb. 8 at an emotional meeting of the ILWU's Longshore Caucus. Vietnam War veterans in the



**ILWU members and others gather on Portland's Eastbank Esplanade May 1 to throw flowers in the Willamette River in memory of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq. ILWU members stopped work for the day, shutting down ports along the West Coast of the United States.**

caucus, some with relatives in uniform, led a discussion about protesting the war. Delegates voted 97 to 3 to approve a resolution calling for an eight-hour "stop-work" meeting during the day shift May 1, to protest the war and call for the immediate, safe return of U.S. troops from Iraq.

ILWU asked PMA's permission for the "stop-work" meeting, but PMA refused. ILWU officials said they weren't officially sponsoring any May 1 activ-

ity, but said members might take action of their own accord.

Twice in the days before the action, PMA went before the West Coast port arbitrator, who ordered the union to notify members they were required to show up to work May 1. PMA also sought an injunction from a federal judge, but the judge declined, on First Amendment grounds.

In the end, union leaders said, it came down to members' free speech

rights to a voluntary protest action.

"Big foreign corporations that control global shipping aren't loyal or accountable to any country," McEllrath said. "For them it's all about making money. But longshore workers are different. We're loyal to America, and we won't stand by while our country, our troops, and our economy are destroyed by a war that's bankrupting us to the tune of \$3 trillion."

McEllrath's figure comes from a book published in March by Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz and Harvard economist Linda J. Bilmes that estimates the true cost to American taxpayers of the war in Iraq will exceed \$3 trillion.

May Day is celebrated around the world as International Workers' Day, dating from a general strike for the eight-hour day in 1886, when police attacked union demonstrators in Chicago. Two years ago, large numbers of marchers linked May Day to immigrants' rights. This year, the ILWU action tied May Day to stopping the war.

Bruce Holte, secretary-treasurer of Portland-headquartered ILWU Local 8, said 1,300 to 1,500 members of ILWU locals from Portland, Longview and Astoria stopped work for the day. At noon, a group of longshore workers met with members of the group Veterans for Peace on a floating dock on the

east side of the Willamette River, just north of the Burnside Bridge in Portland. They held a brief rally, after which they placed flowers in the river to honor U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq.

In Seattle, ILWU was joined by several hundred demonstrators for a waterfront protest march that had the endorsement of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, and a dozen other unions.

In San Francisco, ILWU members were reportedly among nearly 1,000 protesters marching on the waterfront.

The ILWU action got worldwide press attention, and hundreds of people called and e-mailed to thank the union.

The current six-year contract between PMA and ILWU expires July 1 and the two sides have been negotiating since March 17. More than a dozen longshore workers have been killed on the job in the last six years, and the ILWU is seeking safety improvements in the contract. The union is also asking that ships burn cleaner fuel when in port, to cut down on pollution and respiratory complaints by workers.

Six years ago, PMA locked out workers for 10 days and President Bush threatened to bring in troops to do their jobs. He later invoked the Taft-Hartley Act to end the lockout and ordered ILWU members back to work.

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